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THE ILL HEALTH OF HERBERT SPENCER.

BY

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of Philadelphia.

The following citations concerning the health of Herbert Spencer are from the article by Iles in the *World's Work* for February, 1903:

Spencer was born April 27, 1820.

A contributor to the *Leader*, writing of Spencer, at about the age of 30, says:

"Despite his vigorous look, he had even then misgivings about his health."

He had, as a young man, a strong bass voice of good timbre, and used to sing in part music until ill health forbade the exertion.

When he began the composition of "First Principles" in 1860, he adopted the practice of dictating to an amanuensis. He was spending the summer by the shore of a Scottish loch. His habit was to dictate for a quarter of an hour, then row for an equal period with the object of so stimulating the circulation of the blood as to carry him through another 15 minutes' dictation, and so on throughout the forenoon. Neither then nor afterward did he work in the afternoon.

Ten years later, at times when his health fell to a low ebb, he would go to a racket court in the north of London, play with the man in charge, and dictate in the intervals of the game. One of the most abstruse portions of his *Psychology*, the *Argument for Transfigured Realism*, was composed under these unpromising circumstances. His usual program as he wrote the volumes of the "Synthetic Philosophy" was to leave his house soon after 9 in the morning, and direct his steps to Kensington Gardens. There he walked until nearly 10 o'clock, his head slightly bent, his pace somewhat rapid, his mind evidently in meditation.

Ever since [1855] he has been a sufferer from insomnia, and for 18 months after the completion of his book [the *Psychology*] he could do nothing. Then in his impatience he one day resumed work, to discover, as George Sand and others in like case had done, that his strength gradually came back to him. He slowly regained vigor enough to accomplish a large amount of toil, but never with perfect security; it was always touch and go with him. At such times he threw up his work and hurried away to his native Derby, or to Brighton or Tunbridge Wells. There he went about killing time as best he could, feeling thoroughly bored and miserable. In three or four weeks he would return, apparently restored, and without an effort take up his work at the point where he had dropped it; in a moment the bow of Ulysses was bent as easily as ever. As time went on these relapses grew less frequent, and at the end of 15 years' work on the "Synthetic Philosophy" he found

himself, in 1875, in much better health than when he began. In 1897 he underwent a serious collapse, followed two years later by a marvelous restoration, attributed to the use of meat cooked in a particular way. This rejuvenescence disposes him to believe that nervous troubles may be assuaged with advancing years.

He often went to the theaters and the opera, usually in company with friends. He set much store by his annual outing in Perthshire or Argyleshire, where he fished for salmon with the thoroughness which went into everything that he did. His flies were always of his own design. Indoors, when in London, to get through the long, dull evenings when he had no engagements, he played whist at first and then billiards, at which his game was steady rather than brilliant. He often dined out, less from choice than for distraction from toil.

The magazine article of Hles has a full-page portrait of Spencer reading without spectacles, and entitled, "He reads without glasses at eighty-one." It has the stiff, retracted appearance of presbyopes reading within the easy limit of their near-point.

When Spencer visited America in 1882 his address to his friends at Delmonico's was a chapter from his gospel of relaxation and rest. This was drawn from personal experience. In early life he was told by his physician that his health would never improve while he worked so hard and lived alone in lodgings. From the sixties onward . . . his recreations became varied and of inestimable benefit. When lawn tennis was revived he took it up eagerly; he was always ready to join a picnic or excursion, when he was as active and sportful as the youngest.

He first dictated his correspondence, often rebelling at its onerous demands. Then he turned to his systematic work, soon rising to the full tide of dictation; usually he went on without a break till close on 1 o'clock, when he hurried away to luncheon. If his health was out of order he would stop abruptly at any moment and leave the house, saying that his head felt queer. When fairly well he would smoke half a cigar, finding that it promoted the flow of thought.

Considering the difficulty of his subjects, the solidity of the matter and his finish of style and treatment, his rate of composition was not slow. On good mornings he would produce 1,000 words. This was reduced by the time occupied in revision, the arrangement of materials and relapses into ill health to a daily average for the year of 330 words. In 1879, when he was recovering from a serious illness, sitting under the trees of Kensington Gardens, he dictated his autobiography to an amanuensis.

Spencer has never been much of a reader; he was wont to say that if he were to read as much as other people he would know as little as they. He has never bought many books, nor borrowed from circulating libraries or other sources, and yet he has managed to accumulate enormous stores of knowledge. He read but little in the forenoon, and he dared not read at all in the evening through dread of insomnia, but for all that he seemed to miss nothing in print that bore on his work. Almost all his reading must have taken place at odd moments, just after breakfast, after luncheon, and in the afternoons regularly passed at the Athenæum Club. A little time went a long way with him—five minutes over an article, half an hour over a book, availed him as much as half an hour or half a day to

another man. Much was communicated to him by friends of eminence in science, etc.

Naturally of a robust build, he preserved his bodily vigor till past 60; it was in 1884 that he became unable to take his accustomed long walks. In that year he began to drive to the Athenæum Club in the afternoons.

So far as we may draw conclusions from the interesting but, medically speaking, extremely vague suggestions of Mr. Iles, it is at once evident that the symptoms, and their causes, in Mr. Spencer's case are not essentially unlike those of the five already¹ studied. When published, the autobiography may bring more definiteness of detail, and could the case records of his physicians, if he has consulted any, be added, there would be still more certainty elicited in the diagnosis. Of especial service would be the report of the refraction and muscle-balance of his eyes, if such data could be obtained. The early "misgivings about his health," the ill health as a young man that interdicted the exertion of singing—of these we should like details. Unlike all the others Spencer early learned the wisdom of dictating to an amanuensis, and of breaking up his periods of literary work by alternations of rest, exercise, or amusement. These periods of work were sometimes so short in duration as 15 minutes. The intellectual labor itself, of course, could not and did not tire in so short a time. Like all the men whose clinical biographies I have studied,² Spencer used up his ability to do literary work in the few morning hours, and could not carry it on afternoons. He did not use his eyes in such labor evenings because if he did so he was afflicted with insomnia. There was the same necessity as in the others of "killing time," and of being "bored and miserable" in doing so. Only late in life was he unable to take the "long walks" which had been his necessary and saving custom during his life. These long walks, as in the other cases, demonstrate that no organic disease existed, and his 83 years, still well borne, is another proof that the lifelong "nervous troubles" were of a clearly functional nature, that the "always touch and go with him" was dependent upon a temporary, slight, subtle, and easily overlooked cause. In a few minutes "his head felt queer," with near use of the eyes, is one of the most definite hints Mr. Iles gives us, and almost all patients with severe eyestrain make the same complaint.

That Spencer has not been so great a sufferer as De Quincey, Carlyle, and the others mentioned, seems due to several wise habits early formed and always carried out during his life: 1. He dictated all his works. (It should not be forgotten that even in his dictation there was probably use of the eyes at near

¹ De Quincey, Darwin, Huxley, Carlyle, and Browning.

² See *Biographic Clinics*, P. Blakiston's Son & Co., 1903.

range, in the consultations of notes, references, etc. An average of 330 words a day is a very small result so far as amount of product is concerned.) 2. He availed himself of the literary labor of assistants hired for the purpose, or given by friends. 3. He learned, as few literary workers do, to gather his data from the books, etc., which he consulted, with a fraction of the ocular labor that is required by others. 4. He read little, and, plainly, not at all works of a light or popular nature. 5. He practised the art of rest and relaxation when he became "nervous" and "his head felt queer," even if 15 minutes' labor brought on these symptoms. Mr. Spencer's "rejuvenescence" in old age, and his belief that "nervous troubles may be assuaged with advancing years," are but the philosophy of the presbyope who has never heard of the relief that always comes to the eye-strain patient when accommodation effort has become impossible, or when presbyopia has been fully established.

In 1882 Mr. Youmans said of his friend, Mr. Spencer, that he broke down completely from overwork in 1855, and that since then he had not had a night of sound, refreshing sleep. "A victim of overwork" is another expression of Mr. Youmans. Again he says of him in 1882, "The distress of his life for 20 years has been insomnia." At this time Mr. Spencer was 62 years of age, and hence the beginning of this period of great sleeplessness began when he was about 42 years of age—precisely at the beginning of the presbyopic failure, when eye-strain is greatly increased. In 1855 Mr. Spencer was 35 years of age, at which time Youmans says he broke down from overwork. How much of a "victim of overwork" Mr. Spencer was at 35 and 42 appears plainly in Mr. Iles' article. His speech at Delmonico's was in reproof of our American overworking, and in praise of his own lifelong devotion to the doctrine and art of "rest and relaxation." Of all literary men that ever lived, Mr. Spencer was least accurately described as one who overworked. The explanation of Mr. Youmans is an echo of the old error that when the health of an intellectual man or writer fails, it is because of "overwork." The cerebral function of a philosophic or literary man is not more exhausting than that of a business man, engineer, or physician. Then there are millions of people in our strenuous world who "overwork" without insomnia or breaking down, and who work five or ten times as much as Spencer ever did. But they do not have compound myopic astigmatism, and they cannot "read without spectacles at the age of 81." Insomnia, neurasthenia, and breakdown are common results of eyestrain.

That Mr. Spencer is able to read without spectacles at his advanced age is a perfect proof that he is, and has been, myopic. There is nothing in the fact to be proud of, but rather to be

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French

sorry for. Such patients, if they have not suffered thereby from nervous or digestive disorders, have at least denied themselves one of the greatest pleasures in life, that of seeing the world. They do not know how anything a few feet away looks to normal eyes. But the two myopic eyes of a person are not once in a thousand instances alike in their refraction, nor are they without astigmatism. The symptoms from which Mr. Spencer has suffered, at least from early manhood, show that he has always had compound myopic astigmatism, probably anisometropic. There are thousands, even millions, of literary workers, bookkeepers, seamstresses, clerks, students, and professional persons, who are able to work for ten or more hours a day at near-range ocular labor without "queer feelings in the head," "nervousness," headache, insomnia, or digestive troubles. There are other thousands who are able to do so only by the use of spectacles or eyeglasses correcting the "error of refraction" of their eyes. Without such lenses they have some or many of the symptoms complained of by DeQuincey, Carlyle, Darwin, Huxley, Browning, and Spencer. Mr. Spencer has been compelled to adopt the devices described by Mr. Iles in order to obviate, poorly and temporarily, the cerebral and nervous disorders following the use of his eyes even for a few minutes. At any time during his life lenses properly correcting his ametropia would, I think, have enabled him to avoid wasting his superb intellect in boredom and "killing time," and would have permitted him an ability to read and work, as well as a freedom from nervous troubles, which would have been to himself the source of the greatest satisfaction, and wherefrom the world would have enormously profited.



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